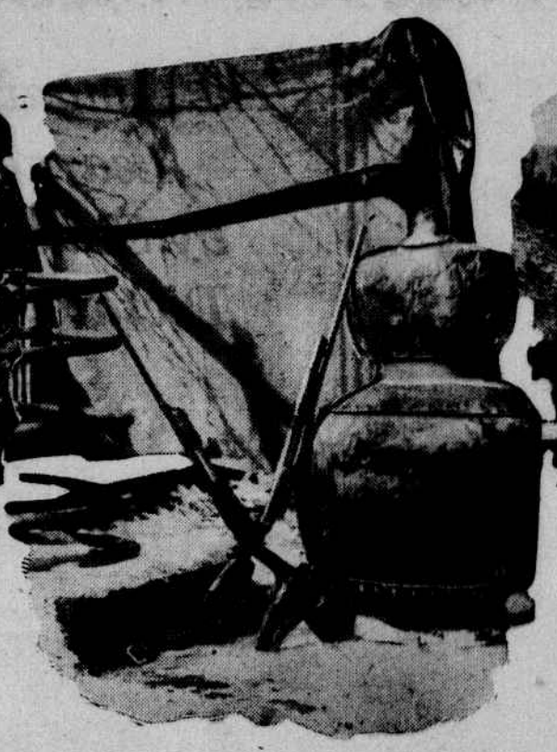
Trail of the Lonesome Pine Leads to 10,000 Stills



At extreme left—Still found in swamp, completely hidden by dense foliage.

At left—Still and rifles seized by Federal officers near Dungannon, Va. The still was operated by Bill and Kenney Rainey.

Women, Not Trusted Altogether by Their Men, Kept in Ignorance That They Will Not Be Able to Testify Against Them

whether in the towns or in the mountains, he is courtly and considerate.

He would attract attention anywhere. He is six feet and two inches tall, and lean. He wears a broad brimmed hat and a flowing coat. He had been a raider before prohibition, hunting the illicit distillers in the mountains from a sheer love of adventure. When prohibition came he was selected by the Government for the biggest raiding assignment in the country—Chief of the Flying Squadron, head of twelve tested and fearless men.

Recently the organization was disbanded. Palmer's raiding nowadays is done on a free lance footing. Whenever he wants a bit of adventure he has himself deputized by the sheriff of Scott county or whatever county he wants to work in.

"We were always sent to the wettest and most dangerous places in the mountains," Mr. Palmer said. "We went in force, thirteen men in all, and were able to handle almost any situation that arose. I believe that one of the most efficient arms of the Government enforcement service was sacrificed when the Flying Squadron was disbanded."

He has been in scores of gun fights. He has never received a scratch.

"I have seen men drop all around me," he says. "I have had men shoot at me, strike at me and attempt to stab me, but I have never been wounded. My comrades have been killed by my side and we have fought pitched battles with moonshiners. I have been fortunate. I have always held human life sacred and have never shot a man unless I had good reason to believe he was trying to kill me, or saw him trying to escape. In my raiding work I have usually carried a .30x.30 Remington rifle, a Smith and Wesson .38 special revolver and a German Luger automatic pistol. Generally we have had to face Remington or Winchester long bore rifles."

The last days of the Flying Squadron were marked with a series of thrilling raids in five States in the "moonshine belt." Battles were fought and men were killed and scores of stills were seized and destroyed. Members of the squadron say their work was more exciting than their war experiences. In this series it is estimated that the source of 50,000 gallons a month was destroyed. But new stills were put in, and the moonshiners kept on at their work.

Beautiful Girl Caught In Act of Making Whisky

But a story of another sort will be told to round out this article. It is a story of a beautiful girl caught making whisky by Chief Palmer. The purpose of its telling is to show how the women do help in the actual work in some cases. Bertha Thomas was opposed to it, and her sweetheart promised her he would quit stilling whenever he should manage to get ahead. This is a story of a different sort—of a mountain family that was not native of the mountains; of a girl who was fairly well educated and whose instincts were inevitably finer than Bertha's. And she was caught actually at work at the stills.

More than a year ago Palmer, then chief of the Flying Squadron, heard of a couple of stills said to be in a spur of the Clinch Mountains near Coeburn, in Wise county, Va. Palmer was in Gate City. He called a deputy and a guide and set out for Coeburn in his automobile. They left the car near the foot of the mountains and started on foot to complete the job.

At noon the three men sat on a log to rest from their difficult climbing when one of them, looking above the trees, sighted the column of smoke which generally has a single and obvious meaning. The wisp was curling from a ravine a short distance down in front of them. The three raiders stood and peered, but could see nothing because of the thickness of the trees in the little gulch. They considered on what would be the best approach to the still. At last Palmer decided to locate the mouth of the gully, advance from it and take a chance on hemming the operators of the still in their own pocket. He led the way cautiously down the hillside and found a path that went straight toward the heart of the ravine. Making as little noise as possible, the three men, Palmer in the lead, followed the irregular direction of the path. Palmer suddenly stopped and gave the signal for quiet.

Pretty Girl Is Trapped As Operator of Still

He opened up the foliage and looked into the little clearing in the center of the hollow. An exclamation of surprise escaped his lips.

"See it, Mr. Palmer?" asked one of his companions.

"Yes; it's right ahead of us. But of all things! Slip up here and see who's running it."

The two crawled on hands and knees to the edge of the clearing.

"Thunderation!" one of them exclaimed when he had seen.

Less than fifty paces ahead of them was the still, and in no important particular was it unlike any of the scores of stills they had seen. That was not the surprise. The cause for their astonishment was that a beautiful girl was busy at the vat—a beautiful, blonde girl with amazing hair, dressed in neat blue gingham. A female moonshiner. She stood back and placed her hands on her hips. She hummed a Scottish ballad. She was watching the slow-burning fire under the great copper kettle.

The officers stood dumbfounded.

"She's fit for another John Fox story," Palmer muttered.

The eighteen-year-old beauty was not aware of being watched. She moved a little distance and filled her arms with wood. She walked to the working still and replenished the fire.

She stood a few feet from the blaze and again assumed a posture of restfulness. She resumed her humming.

Palmer walked out from the underbrush.

"Good morning, Miss," he said.

She whirled like a surprised panther. Palmer lifted his hat and bent in a sweeping, old-fashioned bow. She stared, wide-eyed, leaning back and gripping the top of the wooden fermenter against which she leaned.

Palmer walked slowly toward her, his hat in his hand.

"Good morning," he insisted.

"Good morning," she whispered.

"What is your name?" he queried.

Still keeping her eyes fixed on the officer's face, the girl swallowed and wet her lips. She tried to speak and finally managed to gasp:

"My name is—Blondie Stallard."

"Miss Stallard," said Palmer, "I'm sorry to have to tell you that I am an officer and you are a prisoner."

"Are you—are you going to lock me up in jail?" she questioned falteringly—her tone, her accent, her manner of speaking was not typical of the mountains. Her English was cultured as American education cultures the language.

"I hope not," he answered; "Where is your father? And where do you live?"

"We live just over the brow of the hill," she replied. "Dad ought to be coming down here now. If he isn't on the way he is at the house."

"Let's go," said Palmer, and the three men and the girl started.

At the crest of the hill they saw a man coming down the path toward them.

"That's dad," said Blondie.

Father, Not a Mountaineer, Accepts All Blame

The man was almost as unlike a moonshiner as his daughter was. He was short and stout and prosperous looking. The air of the mountaineer—the raw boned awkwardness of the hillman was not in his bearing.

"Howdy, Mr. Stallard," Palmer greeted him.

"Morning," Stallard answered suavely. "What's the trouble?"

"Well," Palmer began gravely, "we found this girl over there in the gully operating a still. Is she your daughter? I reckon you've guessed we're officers?"

"Yes, I know who you are, all right," was the reply. "This is my girl; what are you going to do with her?"

"There's just one thing we can do," Palmer told him. "If you claim you haven't anything to do with that still back yonder, we'll have to take her to Coeburn and put her in jail."

The girl's lip trembled and she paled.

"We found her working ," Palmer went on, "but I don't believe s s responsible for that still's being there

Stallard seemed to be thinking deeply. The silence was awkward. He seemed to be determining whether he would take the blame or sacrifice his daughter. Then he made his mind up, and spoke:

"Do you mind going to the house with me so that I can get a few things to take with me?"

The little group went toward the house. Arrived there Stallard gathered a few belongings, said his farewells and walked toward the front gate with his captors. The wife and the four children stood on the porch and watched them go. Only Blondie was dry eyed.

As they reached the gate the four men turned at a cry from the porch. Blondie was rushing toward them. She reached her father and clung heavily to his coat lapels.

"Daddy," she choked, "didn't I tell you? Oh, why didn't you listen to me? Please don't leave us for good, Daddy. Please don't!" She was in tears now.

Stallard turned his head, and the little procession went on.

He was sentenced to a year in prison.

He was not a mountaineer. He had been a cattle raiser in the lowlands of Virginia; hard times had come. He had once been prosperous. He wanted to get on his feet again. He had decided to go to the mountains and undertake to recover prosperity by moonshining. He is out of prison now and is back in the valley.

Stallard had fortunately made enough money and more in a year's moonshining to care for his family during his prison term.

The story of the old blacksmith who made his fortune in more or less indirect way from moonshining is illustrative of two things. It points out the tremendous intelligence organization of the moonshiners, and it shows how general moonshining is.

Down in the Great Smoky Mountains, on the North Carolina-Tennessee border, there lives an old blacksmith, who is master of the art of making stills. He made good ones out of copper. He made them big and little, as required. The only trouble was that he couldn't make them rapidly enough to satisfy the demand. But he is still working—that is an utterly unintentional pun—and is "knocking out" his $35 a day with consistency.

The moonshiners supply him with material and he manufactures the outfits at a little blacksmith shop he has established high up in the mountains. The occupation of the blacksmith was finally disclosed when they discovered that stills for miles around were apparently a standard product; that they all had the same brand of workmanship. But they have been unable to get him with the evidence.

He is able to turn out one still a day, for which his price is $35. He is the busiest man in the mountains. Mysteriously, the raiders who have visited him frequently have never been able to find anything even remotely resembling a still around his shop. When they have come they have invariably found him placidly shoeing a horse.

Unquestionably the old blacksmith is favored by the elaborate system of warnings in effect among the moonshiners. Telephones have been a great help to them, for the women in the foothills account it a solemn duty when they catch sight of a raiding party headed for the mountains to flash the warning over the party lines of the telephone systems, and the word is taken up and flashed by other party lines and other means for miles and miles over the mountain section. One of the favorite methods of signaling is by mirror flashes. Another is by rifle shots which are taken up and which resound over the hills for leagues.

Indisputably the "revenuers" have a big job on their hands. The mountaineers are masters of wiles.

The case of the old blacksmith is perhaps not the only example of wholesale metal working. Most of the stills are made in the towns and settlements in the mountain country. Hardware stores are pressed to keep enough copper on hand. The large metal container commonly used to contain gasoline for distribution is excellent material for a still, and is put into use with very little alteration. Hundreds of these have disappeared in the darkness of nights from gasoline stations in the towns. Tinners in the settlements are growing wealthy from still making.

It is quite common for stills to be found in the Government owned forest reserves. A large number of outfits have been seized in the Holston Mountains Reserve by foresters who reported their discoveries to the district court officials.

The fact is, wherever in the South there are mountains there is moonshining in almost unlimited degree. And wherever there is moonshining there is the hand of the law reaching out to apprehend it and its perpetrators. But that the law is having a great struggle is not to be doubted. The millions of gallons that flow from the hills are not being effectually dammed.

Quantity, Not Quality, Slogan of the Moonshiner

The moonshiner of nowadays is after quick results. No longer is he boastful of the quality of his output. His aim is to produce as great a quantity in as short a time as possible. Perhaps this new attitude toward the actual manufacture of moonshine will in time change the methods. Already there is promise of new and more efficacious equipment. The steam still has been invented, and has proved its worth. A dairyman near Nashville found that a far greater profit could be made by using his milk boiling apparatus to make corn liquor. And since his discovery the "steamer" has come into pretty general use in Tennessee—particularly in the foothills near the cities.

The steam still offers a much quicker method of distilling the liquor, and indeed assures some degree of quality since it allows an overdose of sugar to the mash. The potency of new liquor made by the steam method is greater than that distilled in the old mountain fashion in copper vats. Also, it is much easier to make.

The method is quite simple. In place of the copper still of the mountain a barrel is used. The barrel is filled with mash, a lid is fitted so as to be air proof, steam from a boiler is turned into the barrel through a hole near its top, and after the steam has permeated to the bottom of the barrel it escapes through a worm which cools the steam into pure corn juice diluted with a small proportion of pure water. If the power of the boiler is great enough two or three barrels may be operated at once.

The use of these steam stills is only beginning, but the growth is fairly rapid. However, the old copper still is in general use and will be for decades, perhaps. The mountaineers—those perpetual pioneers of the real mountains—have never been quick to accept modern ingenuities. They hold the most utter contempt for anything foreign. Their methods have not changed with their attitude. But it is not to be denied that the possibility for change is among them. They are money mad now, and, doubtless, any improvement which will increase their power for profits will be acceptable to them.

There are still a few in the mountains who have not been smirched by the money tinge. But they are few indeed. Now and then an old mountaineer will be found who recognizes the immorality and the illegality of making moonshine whisky for the market and still holds it his unalterable, irrevocable traditional right to make a little liquor for his own consumption. But this moonshiner is of the old school; his sons are more modern. If the father consents to their going into business for themselves they set up their still near the home—somewhere in the vicinity—and plunge deeply into the game of moonshining for money. If the father fails to give his consent, then they prove themselves willful and go away to get into the game anyhow. They are the new generation, and the new generation looks with high scorn upon the scruples of the elder folk.

One of these old school moonshiners with an inflexible conscience is Ham Wilson. There are many left like him, but where there is one Ham Wilson in the mountains there are ten score who make vile whisky for a thirsty market in order to fill their own pockets. Ham Wilson is one of the old fashioned, long whiskered type of mountaineer who makes whisky to drink and not to sell. Consequently his liquor is a point of pride with him. He is a past master in the art of distillation, and his product meets the most exacting tests. His home is high up in the Great Smoky Mountains where the Big Pigeon River crosses from Cooke County, Tennessee, into Haywood County, North Carolina.

He was once known to concede that there was justification in a law made to curb the sale of moonshine liquor, but he would not agree that there could be any justice in a scheme to deprive man of the privilege of making whisky for his own use.

A man like Ham Wilson will shoot on less provocation than will the commercial moonshiner. He puts what he considers his natural right above any law.

"I ain't sellin' any liquor, and I ain't aimin' to," he once said, "but if any of them derned revenuers in tight breeches comes sneakin' around here, I'll turn old Mirandy loose on 'em."

Old Mirandy, one of the pioneer models of Winchester rifles, was at the moment in bas relief in the wall of Ham's cabin.

The instance of Ham Wilson's naming of his second daughter is a refreshing example of the naivete of this old backwoodsman and others of his sort. He has two daughters, Gracie and Nilly. About a year ago he explained to a friend, a man from Chattanooga, how he had come to select the name, Nilly.

"The old woman and me couldn't set on any name for her when she was a baby," he explained. "I was a-settin' and a-studyin' about the thing one day when I saw a pretty name right on a bottle in front of me. It said 'vernilly' or somethin' like that. I told Maw, and she allowed it was right pretty, too, so we up and called her Nilly."

Half a mile back of the cabin was Ham's still, protected from the weather and the eyes of the curious by a low frame shack. The still was a huge copper affair and was kept scrupulously clean. It shone inside, and this is in contrast to the state of filth into which the stills of the "money moonshiners" grow and are allowed to remain. None of the greenish mold often found inside the stills of the commercially inclined was ever to be seen in Ham's still; it was polished inside until it fairly glittered. His assistant in the manufacture of liquor for his own use was his brother, who was as conscientious as Ham himself. Two nephews aided him for a while, but they grew ambitious and Ham discharged them. They are getting rich now.

Dangerous for Strangers To Wander in Mountains

That it is dangerous for a stranger to wander about in the mountains of the "moonshine belt" is self evident.

It is broadly believed in the mountain country—in some sections it is known for a fact—that Blaize L. Harsell, sportsman, naturalist and writer, of Bedford, N. Y., was shot to death in the mountains of Mitchell County, N. C., or some neighboring section, when a moonshiner mistook him for a revenue officer.

Harsell's disappearance was a mystery—and still is. He was in Roanoke, Va., in February, 1921. Then he wrote his relatives that he was planning to go to a point near Seven Mile Ford—by train—and to set out afoot from there for Jasper, Ga., going through mountain sections of Virginia, Tennessee and North Carolina.

That was the last word ever heard from him. Before leaving New York he promised his relatives that he would write every week or so, but after three months had elapsed from the time of the letter written at Roanoke they had received no word at all. Naturally they became alarmed. They made efforts to trace him, and after six months had no more knowledge of his whereabouts or what had happened to him than they had had in the beginning.

Then Mr. Harsell's brother engaged Elmo W. Brim, a detective, of Galax, Va., to trace the route of the missing man.

Brim learned that Harsell had been seen at Marion, Va., the county seat of Smythe county, about fifteen miles from the North Carolina State line. It is thought that the traveler left the Norfolk and Western train at Marion and took a circuitous route to Boone, N. C.; Blowing Rock, Grandfather Mountain and Linville. Brim met and talked with scores of persons who claimed to have seen Harsell. He finally arrived at the conclusion that Harsell met his death near Pigeon Roost Mountain, in Mitchell county. His body was never found to give confirmation to this.

When he left Roanoke Harsell was attired in a dark gray suit and a coat and hat of English tweed. He carried a rifle, pistol, hatchet, combination hunting knife, knapsack, blankets, hot water bag, cooking utensils and concentrated foods. His plan was to sleep in the open and prepare his own meals.

(To be Continued.)

At top—The "Red Fox" home near Jenkins, Ky.; below—"Two-Gun" Litton, Sheriff of Washington county, Va.; bottom—home of "Uncle Wirt" Peters, who, with his three sons, made moonshine.